

What's the Message – Lesson 129

Today we study St. Paul's guidance to the Church, as recorded in the letter to the Ephesians.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Lord, we acknowledge that we are often so caught up in our daily problems that we forget the power You have given us through Baptism. Help us to see that this wonderful washing of regeneration unites us as members of Your family and enables us to live as one with You. Amen.

Last time we saw Paul's guidance to the church at Corinth regarding the certainty of our resurrection and eternal life in heaven. In today's lesson we see some pragmatic advice on how to live during this temporal life, as recorded in what we know as the letter to the Ephesians. However, a close reading will lead to the conclusion that this letter was not just meant for the church in Ephesus alone, but was intended to be a general letter given to all the churches in the region of the province of Asia. Understanding it this way, we can better relate to the wisdom of this letter for us . . . in our churches today.

Many scholars have reached the obvious conclusion that this epistle is presented in two parts. Dr. Franzmann has written about it this way: "the first (part is) an exposition of what the church is, and the second an exhortation concerning all that membership in the church involves." Since the theme of the first part will be covered in a later lesson, we will only look at the second half of this letter now. It can be characterized as having the central theme of unity through baptism. Chapter 4 begins with these words:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to

your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Here Paul speaks of the selfless characteristics that are needed in the church to grow in unity. He then goes on to talk about the gifts of preachers and teachers God gives His church “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” We are to grow to a spiritual maturity, “so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine.” Then we will be wise enough to apply the knowledge we have gained through this process, and instead of speaking in anger, we can follow the guidance of verse 15:

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Now Paul relates this guidance to the pagan backgrounds which most of these people came from and were surrounded by – just as we are surrounded by a secular society today. He tells them, and us, “that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.” In other words, the life of such a person is separated from God, and they are in darkness so deep that their lives are futile and they grope, only to find nothing. Think of the futility that follows when there is no concept of “absolute truth” and every value is given equal standing. When that kind of confused thinking rules, all paths lead to wherever it is that you are going, and all religions are equally valid. But those paths do not lead to God. So what are we to do?

Paul says we are to *put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created*

after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. . . . Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

This attitude is carried over into chapter 5, where Paul says: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:1-2) Then he adds that we should give “thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:20-21). It is with the same theme of unity through baptism that Paul speaks about marriage and families, beginning in chapter 5, verse 22:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, His body, and is Himself its Savior.

Now, as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her . . . In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. . . . Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (this is the first commandment with a promise), that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land. Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Here we have Paul’s guidance on the most basic of relationships, that of spouses and family. What he has been saying in this letter is that Christ has transformed us as individuals, and this is to be reflected in our relationships with others, especially the family. Husbands, I speak to you especially, for all too often we men fail to live up to our responsibility to be

the head of the family and to set the proper example as an imitator of Christ. We are to lead, yet also to submit to others and care for them out of reverence for Christ. Just as children imitate the examples they see, so we parents are also at the same time the children of God, and He has given us the perfect example to follow . . . in the love of Jesus.

Next time Paul will give us more examples to follow in his letter to the Philippians.